



## **Entangled Biographies: Non-elite South Asian Migrants to Northern Europe in the Interwar Period<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Indo-German exchange and interactions in the early twentieth century have previously been dealt with mainly on a discursive level. An exemplary case is Kris Manjappa's monograph *Age of entanglement: German and Indian intellectuals across empire* which engages comprehensively with various schools of thought that brought Indian thinkers into conversation with German-speaking intellectuals, but only marginally with the impact of physical encounters or non-elite entanglements. Another important study of Indo-German elite exchange is Joachim Oesterheld's work on Zakir Husain, third president of India, who was a PhD student in Berlin between 1925 and 1927 (Heidrich 2001; Oesterheld 2001). The contributions by Razak Khan and Heike Liebau to the forthcoming special issue of the journal *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, titled "The German connection: actors, institutions, networks and the re-formation of modern South Asian Islam" also both engage in one way or the other with the intellectual encounters of Muslim scholars and Islamic religious authorities with German academia and politics in Berlin in the interwar period.



This essay takes a slightly different path. It investigates the life stories of two subaltern South Asian migrants to Hamburg (and later Antwerp), Hardas Singh and Henry Obed, and thereby juxtaposes them not only to the exclusively elite histories but also de-centralises Berlin as the premier space of Indo-German entanglement.

Hardas Singh, a Sikh *ex-sepoy* from the Punjab who fought in the British-Indian army during the First World War, and Henry Obed, an Indian Muslim from Lucknow who spent the war years at sea working for various shipping companies, both arrived in Hamburg in the early 1920s (1924 and 1922 respectively). Whereas Hardas Singh opened an "Indian Bar" in the dock neighbourhood, Henry Obed started a seamen's outfitter store and later a successful livestock business. Although both experienced periods of relative economic and social stability and liberty, they were always at the verge of losing everything they have built up in an instant. They suffered heavy setbacks in the 1940s under Nazi rule and eventually died tragic deaths (in 1946 and 1951 respectively).

This essay sets out to assay the "scope of possibility" for subaltern South Asian migrants to Northern Europe in the interwar period. Distinguished by an outstanding upward social mobility, Hardas Singh and Henry Obed's biographies are not representative for migrants from their class and ethnic background. Rather, they were probing and challenging the limits of possible life trajectories in this particular place and time. I explore the socio-economic factors that constituted the framework for their success and also their failures from the margins. I show how class, however not exclusively to be understood in economic terms, emerges as the central category when trying to understand the limits to social upward mobility. By comparing them to their elite and non-elite compatriots, as well as by looking into the details of their respective biographies, it will become apparent how migrants from a certain family and educational background, by means of outstanding entrepreneurial skill and determination, pushed the boundaries of an otherwise rigid regime of exclusion of South Asian non-elite migrants.

### **Of elites and non-elites**

In 1922, Syed Abid Husein, Indian nationalist Muslim and educationist, enrolled at Berlin University as a PhD candidate with the well-known German educationist and philosopher Eduard Spranger. He had travelled by ship from Bombay via Karachi and London. In the same year, another man named Abid Hussein, Indian Muslim from Lucknow,



reached Hamburg from London with the intention to start an import-export business in the port city. He had left Calcutta in 1915 on board of the S. S. Clan Macaller as a saloon boy and spent the war years working at high sea. He jumped ship in New York around 1920 and arrived in England a year later. In the course of his residency in Hamburg and later in Antwerp, he changed his official name to the more European sounding Henry Obed in order to appeal to his affluent western clients. When interacting with Indian *lascars*, however, he continued to use his Muslim alias.<sup>2</sup> While Syed Abid Husein completed his doctoral thesis on the education theory of Herbert Spencer in 1926, his namesake was reported to the British intelligence service for smuggling 'cocaine, charas and arms' via Indian seamen from Antwerp to India.<sup>3</sup> Two years before, Obed had been expelled from Hamburg on the allegation of illegal activities of similar character.

In 1920, brothers and Islamic scholars Abdul Jabbar Kheiri and Abdul Sattar Kheiri enrolled at Berlin University as students. They belonged to a religious, intellectual middle-class Muslim family in Delhi and had studied in Beirut and Istanbul, before the First World War forced them to go to Germany as exiles. During his studies, Jabbar founded the academic Muslim society Islamia (Akademisch-Islamische Vereinigung Islamia) in 1924, an association of Muslim students from various countries and a vibrant space of cross-cultural interaction (Liebau forthcoming), while Sattar actively worked within the Verein für Inder (Indian association) in Berlin Halensee, where he was engaged in organising sport activities for students from India (Liebau 2018: 4). Both finished their dissertations in Germany (Jabbar studied state sciences and law, Sattar art science) and returned to India separately in 1929 and 1930 respectively.

Another, however much less bourgeois nodal point of South Asian encounter in Germany was Hardas Singh's "Indian Bar" opened in the same year in Hamburg as Jabbar's Islamia in Berlin. Singh's bar was frequented by Asian and African seamen and became a secret meeting point of the clandestine communist network between Moscow and India. In 1928, Singh hosted Amir Haider Khan, an Indian revolutionary on his way to Bombay, who was at the time hiding from the British secret service. After a few weeks at the bar, the latter was eventually able to contact a Bengali fireman who agreed to take him on board the S. S. Trautenfels as a lascar.

Yet another site of encounter was the Ahmadiyya mosque built in 1923 in Berlin by missionaries from Lahore. Since its festive opening in



1925, the mosque and its mission, because of their cosmopolitan approach, created a space where Indian activism and German Life Reform<sup>4</sup> became connected domains of knowledge and social exchange. While the Islamic community stitched trans-cultural and trans-religious networks, especially to Jewish intellectual circles, through marriage and scholarly exchange, Henry Obed likewise showed his transnational inclinations by marrying a German woman, Caroline Margaretha Homann, in 1924. She followed him to their new domicile in Antwerp, partnered in his livestock business and intervened with the authorities on his behalf when he was imprisoned or put on trial.

### **The First World War: setting the stage for elite and non-elite entanglement**

The First World War set the stage for post- and interwar migration of South Asians to Germany. The collapse of the fragile balance of power between the imperial nations turned the continent into a theatre of war, drawing soldiers from across the world into its vortex and put an end to the old German regime. The war saw the first migration of South Asians to the European continent on a larger scale. Between 1914 and 1918, around 140,000 South Asian soldiers were at some stage stationed in Europe, in addition to 50,000 non-combatant labourers who provided 'menial' services (Roy 2011: 19). Some of them crossed the frontier to Germany either as wounded soldiers in hospitals, captives or deserters. According to British and German sources, approximately 1,000 Indian sepoys were held captive in German prison camps. A significantly smaller number of them did not return to India after the war and started a new life in the defeated country.

South Asian elites, predominantly political emigrants, travellers, students and merchants, were initially only marginally affected by the outbreak of hostilities, sometimes even profiting from them. Although South Asian residents from the British colonies had become enemies of the state in the formal sense after Britain had declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, students and businessmen were not interned, only having to report to police stations at intervals (Roy 2011: 58). One B. B. Eranee, importer of chemical dyes to Bombay from Germany, who had lived and worked in Hamburg since 1908, requested the Prussian government's home department in 1915 to grant him permission to leave for India in order to be able to continue operations from there. His inquiry was strongly supported by his



German business partner, *Chemische Fabriken vorm. Weiler-ter Meer*. It was accepted immediately so that he could set out on his journey via Switzerland shortly after.<sup>5</sup>

Revolutionaries and anti-imperialists of different political fashion, who had immigrated to Germany to avoid imprisonment in India, were even courted by the German authorities to collaborate with them against the British. Under the assurance of their mutual interest in liberating India from British rule, Indian emigrants from all over the country (and abroad) were organised in the Indian Independence Committee (IIC) in Berlin in mid-1915. Their task was to carry out propaganda among the South Asian prisoners of war in Germany and prepare them to participate in military campaigns in Turkey and the Persian Gulf (Roy 2011). Despite Germany's defeat, their contribution to the German war effort secured the South Asian revolutionaries a favourable position in post war Germany to the extent that Berlin became the centre for anti-imperial agitation and intellectual exchange in the early years of the Weimar Republic.

The First World War had a significantly different impact on non-elite itinerant Indians. Combatant and non-combatant personnel of the military as well as lascar seamen experienced the war years in the trenches or in captivity. Captured soldiers or deserters from the British Indian army were rounded up in the so-called "Halfmoon camp" in Zossen-Wünsdorf close to Berlin, where they were subject to propaganda and "anthropological" research conducted by the aforementioned parties. Civilian prisoners, predominantly seafarers, were interned under undignified conditions on board of ships and later in various prison camps. The fate of two such lascars, extraordinarily well documented, gives insights into their wartime experience. Gulam Hussein and Akbor Ali, two trimmers on European ships were interned, together with 15 other lascars, at Hamburg port on the S. S. Ehrenfels, possibly their former workspace.

In July 1916, Hussein wrote a letter to the local police authorities, requesting permission for travelling to Berlin, where he intended to meet Virendranath Chattopadhyay, Indian nationalist and prominent member of the IIC. The former spoke on behalf the interned lascars who offered their services to the committee in an endeavour to escape imprisonment. Whereas his plans never materialised, Hussein and his compatriot Ali managed to get temporarily employed in Hamburg. The former worked as a construction worker and painter as well as a coal trimmer in an electrical plant, where the work process resembled his



prior occupation. However, only a few months later, Hussein sent another desperate letter to Berlin, urging Chattopadhyay to intervene on his behalf, as the onset of winter had left him unemployed and destitute in an alien city.<sup>6</sup>

This brief episode hints not only towards the different living and working conditions between South Asians of elite and non-elite backgrounds, but also the different scope of freedom and mobility the two groups enjoyed during the First World War. However, it also shows the knowledge the lascars had of the unequal treatment they received as compared to that of their compatriots. Perfectly aware of the privileged status of Chattopadhyay and his fellow committee members, Hussein and Ali tried to invoke their sympathy by referring to a shared national identity and congruent political affiliation.<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Chattopadhyay, Hussein submissively states:

Falls Sie mich nach Berlin nehmen würden, wäre es bedeutend besser für mich, da ich dort vielleicht irgend welche Arbeit finden würde, oder irgend eine Profession erlernen könnte und dann von dem Verdienst wieder leben kann. Ich bin Ihr eigener Landsmann, Sie sind mein Gott, mein Herr und Alles.<sup>8</sup>

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Unfortunately for Hussein and Ali, there was no need for seamen in the propaganda machine of the IIC yet. As lascars were only considered to be the recipients of propaganda after 1917, when the civil prisoners replaced the soldiers in the Halfmoon Camp who were transferred to a new camp in Romania, Hussein and Ali's request to work for the IIC in 1916 was not answered in the affirmative.

### **The Interwar Years: the high time for non-elite social upward mobility**

When the turbulent initial years after the termination of the First World War made way for a more stable political situation, the living conditions for the South Asian elite also consolidated. The first decade of the interwar years in particular was marked by extraordinary Indo-German intellectual entanglements in the context of a globally felt internationalism. Although the decidedly anti-imperialist political circles became increasingly burdensome for the Weimar government, the authorities were reluctant to resolutely break up these networks. Since many of the former had supported the German military efforts during the war and continued their mutual exchange in academic and spiritual endeavours, they had earned the general sympathy of the Weimar regime. In addition, the Indian emigrants possessed a lot of sensible



intelligence-related knowledge that was more convenient to be monitored within their own jurisdiction.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, a small number of Indians from a very different social background reached Germany with the intention of permanently residing and building up a new life outside the borders of the British Empire.

One of them was Hardas Singh, born in 1882 in Hoshiarpur, Punjab, as the son of a farmer. In 1914, he entered Europe as a soldier of the British-Indian army fighting against Germany and its allies in the trenches of Flanders. Only a few months later, he deserted across the frontlines and surrendered himself to the enemy, having shot his British officer.<sup>10</sup> He was one of the few South Asian prisoners of war to voluntarily participate in the German military campaign to Turkey in 1917. Unable to return to India after the termination of hostilities, he first stayed in Berlin and in 1924 moved to Hamburg, where he opened a bar in the dock neighbourhood, catering mostly to Asian and African seamen who, at that time, were a common sight in Sankt Pauli. From 1924 to 1938, when the bar was closed down by the Nazi authorities, Singh enjoyed considerable freedom with regards to shaping his socio-economic existence.

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In his bar, Asian and black seamen mingled freely with the female population of Sankt Pauli. Moreover, it became a meeting point for the gay community in the 1930s, heavily persecuted as soon as the Nazis came to power. Behind the scenes, Singh's establishment functioned as a secret refuge for communists travelling between Moscow and India, and was allegedly the centre of dispatch of guns and red literature to India via lascars. In 1934, Singh was said to have hosted the Arab seaman Mohmed Ali, who was to be deported to Kenya against his will. Singh was strongly suspected to have paid for his fare to Aden and to have ghost written threatening letters from Ali to the British Consul in Hamburg.<sup>11</sup> While his first wife had died in 1933 in a car accident, he later had a son, born in 1937, with his second fiancé, the German dancer Leonie Meyer. When the couple split up, he had to pay two Reichsmark a day for his son's alimentations.<sup>12</sup>

His good fortunes turned in 1938, when he found himself deprived of his means of livelihood by the Nazi authorities. He survived by taking up casual labour in the port, living from day to day. In 1940, he was accused of having robbed a man's coat late at night with two accomplices. Although he was freed of all charges, he subsequently failed to get up on his feet again. In 1941, he got admitted into a mental hospital. After a five year long ordeal, during which he shifted





between different mental institutions in and around Hamburg, he finally died in one of them in 1946.<sup>13</sup>

Another subaltern migrant to Hamburg in the interwar period was Henry Obed, alias Abid Hussain, alias Muhammad Hussain. Born in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh in 1895, he left his hometown for Calcutta and sailed the world until around 1921 as a seaman in various capacities. Whereas not much is known about his adolescent years and social background, evidence suggests that he was born into a Shia honorary family and at least enjoyed a basic education.<sup>14</sup> After a brief interlude in New York and London, he settled in Hamburg in 1922 and opened a seamen's outfitters store, selling clothing and basic necessities to his predominantly lascar clients. In 1924, allegedly on the grounds of being accused of cocaine smuggling, he moved to Antwerp with his newly wedded German wife, where he immediately resumed his former business. Since he ran the only shop specifically catering to exclusively to Indians, and outbidding his Jewish competitors, his business prospered and he expanded it to the import and retail of live animals from India.

Being the only representative of his Indian supplier in Europe, one Mr. Hussain Buxsh from Karachi, he climbed the social ladder and became a well-respected businessman in the 1930s. He owned two motor cars and a lorry, a house and another shop close to the docks, where he sold dogs, birds and monkeys, etc. His exotic animals were kept in a private zoo in the backyard of his house with the suggestive name 'Villa Hindoustan' (Verhoeven 2011: 405). When Buxsh died in 1933, Obed continued his business, supplying live stock to different zoological gardens in Europe and the United States of America.<sup>15</sup> Despite his economic success, he regularly ran into difficulties with the British secret service, the Antwerp police and business rivals. In 1935, on one of his regular trips to India, he was arrested by the Calcutta police on the allegation of having violated the Bengal smuggling of arms act. A trial was held against him in Camera at the end of which he was acquitted of all charges. His passport, however, was impounded forcing him to make his way back illegally by working his passage on a steamship.

Besides his trading in live stock and seamen's clothing, Henry Obed was engaged in a number of irregular side activities. Since 1923, he was strongly suspected to smuggle arms and ammunition via Indian seamen from Europe to India.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, some evidence suggests that he also supplied cocaine to clients in Europe in India, and further-





more to have helped the Indian communist M. N. Roy to smuggle red literature printed in Germany to the subcontinent. It was because of these activities that he was on the radar of the British secret service since the early 1920s, which frequently caused him trouble when he was abroad for business reasons and eventually lead to the confiscation of his travel documents in 1935. Despite his financial success, the illegal trade remained part of his economic enterprise. His legal business strongly depended on him being able to move freely between his native country and on the reliability of his South Asian partners. Since neither could be taken for granted, the smuggling of contraband possibly provided a second source of income and social security.

While Hardas Singh lost his means of livelihood in 1938, Obed suffered the same fate in 1940. Allegedly on their payroll since 1939, the German espionage service "Abwehr II" sent him on a sabotage mission to Ireland after the Nazis occupied Belgium. Him and his assigned accomplices, two Germans whom he had never met before, were immediately caught after their arrival on the Island. Like many other German agents, he spent the rest of the war in an Irish military prison, where he suffered more than his European fellow inmates. Being fanatical racists, they bullied and insulted the Indian, whom they blamed for their mission's failure. He was attacked because he 'insisted on playing his nigger music'<sup>17</sup> and attempts were made to beat him up.<sup>18</sup> Obed thus avoided the Germans and befriended members of the I.R.A. who were also held captive in Athlone Military prison.<sup>19</sup>

After the war, Obed was first repatriated to India but returned to his wife in Antwerp in 1950. Despite his repeated effort, he was not granted any travel documents from the Indian government on account of his previous criminal record, and therefore once again entered Europe illegally. Consequently, he was arrested by the Belgian police shortly after his arrival. His life came to a sudden and tragic end, when his wife murdered him for having an affair, ironically with the daughter of a police official in 1951.

As it has become apparent, both Henry Obed and Hardas Singh had to engage in illegal or illegalised side businesses to earn their living. The smuggling of contraband by Obed, and Singh turning a blind eye to prostitution not only provided additional income but also created an underground network they could fall back on in times of crises. Access to the illegal networks was established through their contacts to the seafaring world. Due to their experience on board ship (even Singh



reached Marseilles via steam ship in 1914/15) and their proximity to the docks, both of them found it easy to reach out to the lascar community. Moreover, not only the need for an additional source of income, but also their ability to move confidently within a certain social milieu facilitated their entry into the world of smuggling. Indians from a more elite background would have been regarded with suspicion by the seafarers, and the former would have been equally repulsed by the prospect of intermingling with the lower class workers.

Obed's engagement with the seafaring community presumably helped him in finding employment as a deckhand when he had failed to retain his passport in Calcutta in 1935. Hardas Singh's contacts to the lascars calling at Hamburg port allowed him to provide shelter and safe passage to fellow countrymen hiding from the authorities. However, their immersion in unlawful activities was born out of necessity rather than out of their own free will. The backlash of these affairs was the constant surveillance by the British secret service and local authorities, putting their legal business, and in extension their own well-being as well as that of their families, at imminent risk. As opposed to their elite compatriots, returning to India was not an option. Eventually, the Nazis had no troubles shutting down Singh's bar on the pretence of it being a place of homosexual encounter. Likewise, the numerous allegations against Obed on account of smuggling came in handy when he was to be recruited to take part in the German espionage effort during the Second World War.

Despite their economic success, which at least in the case of Henry Obed resulted in significant social capital expressed by status symbols like trucks, mansions and exotic pets, emulating European high society, neither of them was ever able to attain socio-economic security. On the contrary, they were at any moment at risk of losing everything they had built up for themselves. Their lives were marked by a constant struggle at the margins of society and existence, never able to feel carefree and settled. Although they showed extraordinary strength in resisting the obstacles they encountered, in the end they had no agency to fend off the final blows to their migrant lives. Obed's recruitment for the "Abwehr II" and subsequent murder by his wife, perhaps triggered by his long absence while in prison, as well as Singh's ordeal and death in a mental hospital can be seen as a consequence of the deprivation of their means of livelihood in particular and the hardships they had faced throughout their lives in Europe in general. Obed and Singh's life journeys mark the limits of possibility for a migrant South Asian biography in the interwar period.



Nowhere close to being representative, their biographies, however, embody the maximum there was to accomplish, in terms of respect and appreciation earned and freedom and agency possessed and realised by a migrant of their social background in this particular period in time.

The boundaries defining the "scope of possibility" are drawn by class identity. Hardas Singh, coming from a peasant family in rural Punjab is a point in case. Henry Obed, despite presumably being born into a Shia honorary family with networks extending into high political and economic circles, was likely to have experienced social and financial distress when his father died in 1915, leading him to drop out of school and leave his natal village for Calcutta in search of work. However, class, here, is not exclusively to be defined as an economic category. As I have shown, even tremendous financial success did not translate into social stability.

How, then, must one define class? First, family background and cultural heritage, leading to a certain kind of universally recognised attitude and behaviour, alongside an implicit self-confidence and a sense of entitlement as well as belonging to and interacting within to certain social milieu are crucial factors in shaping class identity. As compared to Syed Abid Hussein, the Kheiri brothers and Dr. S. M. Abdullah, neither Singh nor Obed finished their primary education, not to mention a University degree. They were not exposed to intercultural encounters while growing up and had to fight for survival since their early adolescent years.

Second, race plays an important role in shaping class. While other Asian migrants to European port cities, for example the Chinese community in Hamburg, were much more successful in establishing themselves at least numerically (even the Chinese quarters were raided and destroyed during the Nazi period, erasing Chinese existence from the Sankt Pauli neighbourhood entirely) as migrants in the interwar periods. They occupied economic niches and were generally more accepted by the local population. It is not easy to grasp race as a class barrier as the indicators are subtle and not always explicit in the sources. Yet, Hardas Singh implied its significance in a court case held against him in 1940 in Hamburg, where he was accused of stealing a coat. In his testimony, when reminded to tell the truth, he replied that he was an Ur-Aryan and hence would never lie.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in an account in a local journal published in 1932/1933, quite representative for the time, Singh's bar is described in highly radicalised terms:



Aber zwischen Reeperbahn und dem Hafen gibt es noch ein Gewirr dunkler Gassen, ganz verzwickte Straßen, da gibt es die Blue Star Diele, wo die Antwerpener Diamantenhändler sitzen, oder das Puppenstübchen, wo sich vergnügte, Zigarren rauchende "Damen" Stelldicheine geben. Oder haben Sie nicht genug Phantasie, um sich vorzustellen, daß sich in der "Indian Bar" die Neger treffen und keine Inder, weil dort zwei sehr süße Negerinnen "Köhm" ausschenken?<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, the distinction, separating Obed and Singh from Hussein, Abdullah, the Keiris and others, marking the former as subalterns as opposed to elite, is one based on class. However, the lines between subaltern and elite are neither rigid nor clearly defined, but ambiguous and contested. The Kheiri brothers came from a middle-class Muslim family and even Syed Abid Husein has a non-elite background. His father had barely managed to pay for his second tier ticket from Bombay to London. He could not survive too long in expensive Oxford and a year later decided to shift to Berlin University. Jabbar's PhD thesis was titled *Indien und seine Arbeiterschaft: Ihre Entstehung und Bewegung* (India and her working class: emergence and development) and hence builds a bridge between his intellectual interests and his sympathy for working class politics and issues.

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To take this point further, the Second World War put an end to even the most elite entanglements. Despite their interaction with elite circles and educated patrons, the Berlin mosque had to shut its doors while the Indian revolutionary exiles shifted their headquarters from Berlin to Paris. Their Jewish networks ceased to be a support structure since the increased persecution of Jewish scholars after 1933. In 1939, the third Imam of the Ahmadiyya mosque, Dr. S. M. Abdullah, was declared Enemy Alien and forced to leave Germany, while the communist members of the mosque had already fled the country six years ago. The end of the "internationalist moment" replaced compliance and friendships with a different kind of Indo-German relationship, based on ideological proximity and political collaboration.

### **The Second World War and the end of non-elite possibility**

Most prominently, the Indian revolutionary Subhash Chandra Bose, but also the Kheiri brothers now in Aligarh collaborated with the Nazi regime between 1941 and 1943. On 11 September 1942, Bose was present at the inauguration of the Indo-German friendship society in Hamburg's town hall, in the company of the mayor as well as various SS-officials.<sup>22</sup> In February of the same year, Bose had appealed to the



Indian population of Germany and beyond in a radio broadcast to fight for the liberation of India. Another Indian broadcaster by the Name of Malik Rauf of Berlin Radio's Indian Service allegedly had approached Obed in 1940 and told him that 'all Indians must do something for the motherland' and asked him to go to Ireland and assist the Irish National Army against Britain, as Germans had good relations with the former.<sup>23</sup> As it is well known, Bose later founded the "Indian Legion", composed of volunteers among the Indian prisoners of war in Germany, which had to fight under the command of the Waffen SS.

Others, like the father of the famous Indo-German filmmaker Harun Farocki, and the equally famous historian Suraiya Faroqui, Abdul Quddus Faroqui, were able to study medicine and aeroplane engineering in Berlin and Hamburg during the war years undisturbed. He, too, allegedly broadcasted for the Nazis in English and Hindustani and participated in propaganda directed at Indian prisoners of war, mirroring the German strategy of the First World War.<sup>24</sup> After the end of the war, he practiced medicine in Hamburg and stayed there until his death in 1968 with a brief interlude in India and Indonesia between 1946 and 1950.<sup>25</sup> Of Henry Obed's involuntary collaboration with the NS-regime I have already spoken. Even Hardas Singh, who evidently had severely suffered from Nazi interference in his life, was not without ties to his oppressors. He appears in a booklet titled "List of suspect civilian Indian on the continent of Europe", compiled by the British secreted service in 1944.<sup>26</sup> In there, it is stated that his bar was raided by the Nazi police despite him being on good terms with them.

### **Towards a conclusion**

In this article, I have laid out the characteristics of what could be termed a 'minor cosmopolitanism from below'<sup>27</sup>, echoing the elite's internationalism of the interwar period, but functioning under a wholly different set of socio-economic circumstances, resulting in life trajectories very unequal to their elite counterparts. This cosmopolitanism from below expands Claude Markovits' notion of 'occidentalism from below', a term he uses to describe any body of knowledge and any representation concerning the West by non-elite non-Westerners (Liebau 2010: 40). Without making any claims about the originality or authenticity of their ideas, in his case retrieved from censored letters written by sepoys during the First World War from France, he states that the soldiers' discourse is relatively autonomous from that of the



elite. The same applies for the internationalism of the non-elite migrants to Hamburg.

I have shown how class, determined by economic success, but also significantly by social background and race, is an important marker of difference. Class becomes a defining category when researching the "scope of possibility" of subaltern migrant life in interwar Germany. It set the limits for social upward mobility and helps to explain why South Asians from non-elite backgrounds lived their lives on the margins of legality despite being part of successful and extensive family, social and economic networks.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my colleagues Perna Agarwal and Bharathan Chandrasekaran for their critical and encouraging comments and thoughts they shared with regards to the article.

<sup>2</sup> BL/IOR/L/PJ/12/477.

<sup>3</sup> BL/IOR/L/PJ/12/477.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the connection between Indian intellectuals and the Life Reform movement, see the following contributions to the forthcoming special issue of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 'The German Connection: Actors, Institutions, Networks and the Re-formation of Modern South Asian Islam': Razak Khan, Entangled translations: psychology, pedagogy and youth reform in Germany and India; Heike Liebau, Networks of knowledge production: South Asian Muslims and German scholars in Berlin (1915-1930), as well as Elija Horn, New education, Indophilia and women's activism: Indo-German entanglements, 1920s to 1940s. *Südasien-Chronik – South Asia Chronicle*, 8/2018, pp. 79-109.

<sup>5</sup> 132-1 I\_3816 Behandlung der in Hamburg befindlichen Inder.

<sup>6</sup> 132-1 I\_3816 Behandlung der in Hamburg befindlichen Inder.

<sup>7</sup> Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 132-1 I\_3816 Behandlung der in Hamburg befindlichen Inder. In a letter from Hamburg police to Hamburg senate from July 28, 1916, the former says that the interned lascars desire to go to Berlin to be at the disposal of the IIC.

<sup>8</sup> Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 132-1 I\_3816 Behandlung der in Hamburg befindlichen Inder. Translation: It would be significantly better for me if you would call me to Berlin, as I may find some kind of work there or might be able to learn any profession which would then allow me to make a living. I am your compatriot, you are my God, my Master, my Everything.

<sup>9</sup> Ali Raza and Benjamin Zachariah make this argument in their article "To take arms across a sea of trouble: the 'Lascar System,' politics and agency in the 1920s". *Itinerario*, 36 (3), pp. 19-38. They point out that even the notorious head of the Calcutta police, Charles Tegart, was of the opinion that the network built up in Germany was worth preserving, and for that reason the exiles should be left in Germany (see p. 24).

<sup>10</sup> Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 213-11\_4562/40.

<sup>11</sup> BL/IOR/L/PJ/12/489.

<sup>12</sup> Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 213-11\_4562/40.



<sup>13</sup> ITS Bad Arolsen, 01/36448950.

<sup>14</sup> Indicators for his educated background are his networks into influential political circles. In 1947, he writes a letter directly to Nehru, applying for a new passport to return to Belgium (Mark M. Hull, *Irish secrets*, p. 255). This letter was donated to the Military Archives, Dublin by his family when they visited Ireland. In 1948, a M.L.C from Lucknow, Saligram Tandon sends a letter to the Home Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, asking him to intervene on his behalf in the passport matter. Tandon states in this letter that 'Mr. Obed + his family are my neighbours, so I have every sympathy for him.' (NAI, Home (Foreigners-I), 1948, File No. 127/48).

<sup>15</sup> Irish Military Archives, G2/X/0375, Arrest of Germans at Cork, Statement of Henry OBED, 14. St. Aldegondiskaai, Antwerp.

<sup>16</sup> BL/IOR/L/PJ/12/477.

<sup>17</sup> IMA G2/2468, Walter Simon to Elizabeth Simon, March 1941, cited from Mark M. Hull. 2004. *Irish secrets: German espionage in wartime Ireland 1939-1945*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, p. 243.

<sup>18</sup> IMA G2/X/0203, Healy report, 2 Feb. 1942, cited from Mark M. Hull, *Irish secrets*, p. 243.

<sup>19</sup> Irish Military Archives, G2/X/0375, Arrest of Germans at Cork, a memorandum titled 'Obed'.

<sup>20</sup> Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 213-11\_4562/40. His exact words in German were as follows: 'Ich bin ein Urarier und tue niemals lügen.'

<sup>21</sup> Heinz Liepmann. 1932/33. Häfen, Mädchen und Seeleute. *Velhagen & Klasings Monatshefte*, 47 (1), p. 285. Translation: However, between Reeperbahn and the docks one finds a maze of dark allies, crooked streets, there is the Blue Star Diele, where Antwerp diamond merchants are located, or the Puppenstübchen, where merry, cigar smoking 'ladies' have romantic encounters. Or don't you have enough phantasy to imagine that in the 'Indian Bar' niggers meet, and not Indians, because there are two sweet nigger waitresses serving 'Köhm'?

<sup>22</sup> Bose beim Hamburger Festakt. *Mittagsblatt, Hamburger illustrierte Zeitung*, 12 September 1942, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> IMA G2/X/0375, Obéd statement, 9 July 1940, cited from Mark M. Hull, *Irish secrets*, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> BL/IOR/L/PJ/12/659, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> I was kindly provided with this piece of biographical information by Suraiya Farouqi in a telephone interview.

<sup>26</sup> BL/IOR/L/PJ/12/659, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Razak Khan writes in his paper of a 'minor cosmopolitanism' when referring to the exchange between South Asian Muslims and German Jewish intellectual thought: Razak Khan. Forthcoming. Entangled translations: psychology, pedagogy and youth reform in Germany and India. *Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Special Issue, The German connection: actors, institutions, networks and the re-formation of modern South Asian Islam, p. 3.

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